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ABSTRACT

Benefits of multi-age grouping include continuity for children and teachers, a sense of community, the possibility for peer tutoring, and an incorporation of developmental differences. This study explored the development of a non-graded program in a New York City public school, particularly the attitudes of teachers, students, and parents to the new program. Twenty subjects in each category completed a survey or an interview. Results indicated that not only were parents and students relatively uninformed about mixed-age grouping before the program began, but teachers also felt that the support and training they received were inadequate. Teachers did have positive attitudes about the benefits of mixed-age grouping, however, and students seemed to have made a positive adjustment. About half of the parents held positive attitudes toward mixed-age grouping, but parents overall appeared to reserve judgment because of a perceived lack of information. (EV)

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Implementing a Multi-age Model in a New York City Public School

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This article evaluates the feelings of teachers, students and parents as they implement a multi-age model in a New York City public school. Well planned implementation of this model is essential to its success. Also essential is administrative and community support, and well trained teachers who are willing to put an extra effort into developing a school community. Other factors that contribute to the success of this model are the teacher's understanding of thematic learning and willingness to dispose of traditional methods of assessing children. Children who are grouped using the multi-age model will spend two years with the teacher. The curriculum is driven by the interests and needs of the particular group of students. Multi-age grouping also benefits the children by eliminating the need for "social promotion" since the children have two years to attain the skill level necessary to move onto the next group. Parents must be willing to accept non-traditional methods of teaching because parental support is an important component of multi-age grouping.

Implementing a Multi-age Model
in a New York City Public School

Introduction

In the 1990's, the epidemic overcrowding in New York City public schools created the need to rethink our way of educating children. We have begun to reform the way we look at assessing children's progress and grouping children. The old system of tracking children into specific courses and grades has begun to give way to a modified system of multi-age groups. Many schools have begun to experiment with non-graded classrooms in order to meet the developmental needs of children who come from varied backgrounds.

Non-graded classrooms, multi-age grouping, and mixed-aged grouping are all terms used to describe the system of grouping children of different ages and ability levels together, without dividing them (or the curriculum) into steps labeled by grade designations. (Gaustad, 1992, p. 1) Bingham states that not all configurations termed multi-age fit the true definition. Multi-age classrooms are not two grades grouped together for convenience, nor a combined class where separate curricula continue. A true multi-age classroom is a permanent class grouping of planned diversity. (1995, p. 8) Many multi-age grouping programs are using the term "family grouping". This term is derived from the idea that older children in a family often facilitate the learning of the younger children as the older children become "more expert" from the experience. In any classroom, there also is a range of abilities and strengths. The non-graded classroom strives to build upon this diversity. Katz (1992, p. 1), states that the primary rationale for this type of grouping is to increase the heterogeneity of class composition and thereby liberate teachers and

children from rigid achievement expectations linked to a pupil's age. Multi-age grouping is being implemented throughout the grades, but has been found to be most valuable in the early grades. When Piaget described the stages of children's cognitive development, he was careful to give these stages a range of ages at which children make the transition from one stage to another. The differences are most notable in the earlier grades where the is also a wide range of physical and emotional development. The non-graded classroom attempts to make maximum use of these variations.

The diversity of the group of children is addressed in many different ways. One of the key components of this type of grouping is the hope that the children who are more competent at a task or skill will assist in the development of less competent children. Vygotsky's theory on the Zone of Proximal Development states that children learn best from a "more knowledgeable person". This person need not be an adult. Children at various stages of development may contribute to the classroom environment in different ways. The non-graded classroom teacher should facilitate children's learning and communication by grouping desks or tables together so children can easily work in groups. Curriculum areas are frequently arranged into "Learning Centers" with a focus on hands-on materials to assist in the child's discovery of basic concepts. Children are often grouped in flexible groups so that the differing needs of the children can be met. Multi-age grouping also facilitates thematic study. The classroom is driven by the interests and needs of that group of students.

The Benefits of Multi-age Grouping

According to Bingham, (1995, p. 8-9) teachers most often mention the following when they discuss what they value most about multi-age grouping:

1. Continuity for children and teachers because they remain together for more than one year.

2. The teacher can see each child within the context of a broad developmental range.

3. The teacher can evaluate each child at their own developmental level without the imposition of grade level expectations.

4. The class becomes more like a family which supports the teacher's goal of building a sense of community.

5. Since about half of the class returns each fall, there is a sense of continuity. The teacher and the children already know each other and are familiar with each other.

6. The older children can model classroom routines, acceptable behaviors and use of skills for new classmates.

7. Peer tutoring is encouraged and facilitated.

8. The teacher has flexibility for setting up groups, she can group heterogeneously and homogeneously depending on purpose and need.

9. Children with special needs stand out less.

10. Children have many opportunities for collaborative and cooperative efforts.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this article is to explore the development of a non-graded program in a New York City public school. The school is newly built and there have been many obstacles to overcome because of this

fact. Gaustad feels that the development of a multi-age program takes several years in an established school. (1992, p. 4) Multi-age grouping has been experimented with in different forms over the last several decades without much success. According to Gaustad, many factors contributed to the failure of this system of grouping in the late 1960's and early 1970's. She cites the inadequate understanding, lack of administrative and community support, and poorly planned implementation as the reasons for failure. (1992, p.1) The trend for educational reform in the 1990's has sent educators searching for innovative ideas. Gaustad feels that today's model is supported by additional decades of research and refined by the study of successful programs.

Gaustad quotes Goodland and Anderson who found that understanding and support by teachers and parents are the factors that are the most crucial to the success of a non-graded program. (1992, p. 3) She feels that informed parents will be more likely to support a non-graded program. Gaustad also quotes Miller who feels that teachers must receive practical training in multi-age teaching by receiving opportunities to observe effective models. (1992, p. 4)

The survey will focus on the thoughts of the teachers, who are struggling with a practice which is often unfamiliar to them, the children, who are now learning in an environment which is different to them and the parents, many of whom are having trouble understanding this non-traditional way of grouping and assessing children. I have devised my questions to evaluate the amount of understanding parents have and how they received that information. I have also tried to determine the amount of training and support offered to teachers.

Method

Sample

A sample of teachers, parents and students from a newly formed school in New York City which implemented multi-age grouping in its first year of operation was selected to participate in the survey. The questionnaire was distributed to 20 teachers on a random basis. Ten teachers in the upper school (grades 4-8) received the survey and ten teachers in the lower school (grades K-3) also received it. Seven of the twenty teachers chosen to participate had ten or more years experience teaching, seven had three to nine years experience, and six had less than three years experience. Ten children from the lower school were randomly selected to participate in an interview, while the survey was distributed to ten children from the upper school. Five of the children who participated in the survey had been in a multi-age setting before. Twenty parents were randomly selected to participate in the survey. Ten of the parents and children were related while the rest were not. None of the parents who participated in the survey had ever had a child in a multi-age setting before.

Procedure

A series of questions were developed to determine the feelings of teachers, students and parents about the multi-age grouping model that was being implemented in the school. The questionnaire was answered anonymously by all of the participants with the exception of the children from the lower school who participated in an interview which I conducted. In an effort to protect the candor of the responses, none of the children who participated in the oral interview knew me as a teacher in the school.

TEACHER SURVEY

This survey is being distributed for a study on multi-age grouping. Please answer the questions to the best of your ability. All responses will be kept confidential. Thank you.

1. What grades do you currently teach? _____

2. How many years teaching experience do you have? _____

3. Do you have any former experience teaching in a multi-age setting? _____

   If so, describe the experience.

_____

_____

4. Have you had any training in multi-age grouping? _____

   If yes, describe the training. _____

_____

5. Describe the support you have received to implement the multi-age

   design in your classroom. _____

_____

6. How do you feel about multi-age grouping?

   a. I like teaching this type of group.

   b. I dislike teaching this type of group.

   c. I don't know how I feel about teaching this type of group.

Why? _____

7. How do you address the differences in the curriculum between the two

   grades you teach? _____

_____

8. How do you group the children? _____

_____

9. Do you plan differently for each grade level? _____

STUDENT SURVEY

This survey is being distributed for a study on multi-age grouping. This is an independent study I am conducting as part of my research for my Master's Degree at Lehman College. The results of this study will not influence any school policy or placement of children. Please answer the questions to the best of your ability. All responses will be kept confidential. Thank you.

1. What grade are you in? _____

2. Have you ever gone to a school where there was more than one grade in a room?_

   If so, describe the experience. _____

   _____

3. How do you feel about being in this type of class? _____

   _____

   _____

4. What is good about having older children in your class? _____

   _____

5. What is good about having younger children in your class?_____

   _____

6. Do you feel that the children in your class help each other learn? _____

   _____

   How?_____

   _____

PARENT SURVEY

This survey is being distributed for a study on multi-age grouping. This is an independent study I am conducting as part of my research for my Master's Degree at Lehman College. The results of this study will not influence any school policy or placement of children. Please answer the questions to the best of your ability. All responses will be kept confidential. Thank you.

1. What grade is/are your child(ren) in? _____

2. Why did you choose this school for your child(ren)? _____

_____

3. Did you attend any of the briefing sessions before enrolling your child(ren)? _____

   If not, did you receive any information about multi-age grouping prior to enrolling your child? Describe. _____

_____

4. What do you know about multi-age grouping?_____

_____

   How did you get your information?_____

_____

5. If you feel you have enough information, do you agree that this type of grouping will be beneficial to your child(ren)? _____

   Why or why not?_____

_____

_____

6. How do you think you could get more information regarding multi-age grouping?

_____

_____

7.Do you feel that multi-age grouping addresses the needs of all the children?

_____

_____

Results

Teacher Responses

Eleven of the twenty teachers returned the survey. Of the eleven, five (46%) had ten or more years experience, three (27%) had three to nine years experience, and three (27%) had less than three years experience.

Teachers were asked if they had any prior experience teaching in a multi-age setting. Forty-five percent of the teachers who responded replied that they had some experience teaching in a multi-age setting. The respondents who reported prior experience with this type of grouping, had different experiences ranging from student teaching to teaching for several years in a multi-age setting.

When asked if they had any training in a multi-age setting prior to beginning teaching in this school, 55% responded that they felt they had received some training ranging from college courses to on the job training. Only one teacher (9%) reported receiving training from the school district.

The teachers were asked to describe the support they felt they had received in order to implement a multi-age model in their classroom. Thirty-six percent of the teachers who responded felt that they had received no support in implementing this design in their classroom, eighteen percent responded that they had received some support from instructors and college advisors, and forty-six percent felt that they had received some in house support, but that this support was either not adequate, or there was not enough time to make use of the available support.

When asked how they felt about teaching in this type of setting, eight teachers (73%) reported that they enjoyed teaching this type of group. They reported that they liked the fact that the children were able to learn from each other. Several of the teachers commented on the children's enthusiasm for learning and the excitement that the children experienced when learning from and teaching each other. Several teachers also commented upon the enjoyment of teaching some of the same children for two years. Two teachers (18%) reported feeling ambivalent about this type of grouping, while only one teacher (9%) reported disliking this type of grouping. The teacher who did not like this type of grouping felt that it was too difficult to combine the goals of both of the grades and teach the basics that she felt were necessary for the children to succeed.

The teachers responded that they addressed the differences in curriculum in a variety of ways. Ninety-one percent of the teachers responded that they integrated curriculums for both grade levels and taught thematic units which incorporated both curriculums. Some reported that they adjusted assignments based upon the children's level of skill rather than grade level, however, none of the ninety-one percent who integrated curriculums reported differentiating between the grade levels. One teacher (9%) responded that she was unable to address the differences in curriculum. She felt that she tried to teach to the middle level but could not meet the needs of all the children in her class.

45.5% percent of the teachers reported grouping students homogeneously according to reading and math ability levels, 45.5% percent reported grouping students heterogeneously, and 9% percent reported that they did not group children in their class for any purpose.

None of the teachers responded that they planned differently for each grade level. Some reported that they used open ended assignments, assignments that had extensions and challenges for students.

Student Responses

Twelve of the twenty students selected responded to the survey. Fifty percent of those who responded, were from the upper grades and fifty percent were from the lower grades.

One child reported that he had attended a school where there was more than one grade in each room. He reported that he had learned "alot" that year.

Sixty-seven percent of the students who responded to the survey reported that the enjoyed being in a class with more than on grade in a room. Thirty-three percent reported that they did not like being in a class with more than one grade.

The children were asked what was good about having older children in their class. Those who were in the higher grade (50%) responded that it was good because they liked being the oldest in the class, 40% responded that it was good because the older children helped them. Ten percent responded that it felt like a family.

When asked what was good about having younger children in the class, 75% responded that they liked being able to help someone who was younger than they were, 25% responded that it was good for the younger children to be able to learn more advanced work.

The children were asked if they felt that the children in their class helped each other learn. 100% of the children responded that they felt the children helped each other learn. Some responded that there were

occasional fights and discord in the classroom, but on the whole they felt that they were all able to help each other in some way. Here are some of the responses:

"We ask each other question(s) and help one another all the time. We all enjoy being (in) it."

"We all help each other by helping someone when they don't understand"

"...friends follow each other."

"I ask question(s) that (I) don't understand instead of alway(s) asking the teacher. It helps."

Parent Responses

Ten of the parents selected responded to the survey. Of the parents who responded, fifty percent reported having more than one child in the school, fifty percent reported having only one child in the school.

The parents were asked why they chose this school for their children. Thirty percent responded that they enrolled their child because it was a new school, 20% responded that it was selected because it was closer to their home, 30% reported that they heard it was going to be a "good school" (better education, smaller classes, better teachers), 20% reported that they like the idea of it being a "progressive school" (K-8, professional development, multi-age groups).

Of the ten parents who responded, 70% had attended the briefing sessions, while 30% had not.

Parents were asked what they knew about multi-age grouping. Eighty percent reported that they had little or no information about multi-age grouping. Twenty percent reported that they were well informed

about how their children would be grouped in the school. They were asked how they obtained their information. They reported that the information was offered at the briefing sessions, through staff members both at the new school and at the child's former school (although only 20% reported receiving any information at the previous school), and through word of mouth from other parents.

The parents were asked if they felt they had enough information to make a judgment as to whether multi-age grouping would be beneficial to their child. Fifty percent felt that they had enough information and they felt that multi-age grouping would satisfy the needs of their child. Fifty percent felt that it was too soon to tell, or that they did not have enough information. Of the fifty percent that felt they did not have enough information, one parent felt that her child's needs could not be met with this type of grouping.

The parents were asked where they felt they could turn to get more information on multi-age grouping. Twenty percent felt that they did not know where to turn, twenty percent felt that the school should provide some more parent information sessions, ten percent felt that they should research it on their own, thirty percent felt comfortable asking their child's teacher or the director of the school for more information and twenty percent felt that they did not need any more information.

Fifty percent of the parents who responded to the survey felt that multi-age grouping addressed the needs of all the children in the class. Some of the parents reported witnessing the changes in their children. They reported that their children were "happier" in this type of group, or that they were beginning to see the growth of self-confidence in their

child. Fifty percent reported that they felt multi-age grouping could not meet the needs of all the children.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the feelings of teachers, students and parents had about multi-age grouping. The most important factors contributing to the success a school has with this type of grouping is the support received from administration and the community, the understanding that parents have of the program, and well planned implementation. (Gaustad, 1992, pp. 1, 3) A survey was developed and distributed randomly to teachers, students and parents at an inner city school where multi-age grouping was being implemented. Before the survey was distributed to the parents and students at the school, it had to be revised in order to meet the approval of the administration.

This school was built to alleviate the severe overcrowding in the district. Staff were interviewed by a committee of parents, teachers and administration. Special characteristics were looked for in selecting the teachers who were to teach in the school. In order to facilitate the implementation of a multi-graded program, teachers were carefully screened. It was expected that the teachers would have an interest in progressive education and would be willing to put forth a team effort in building the school community. Information sessions for parents were offered several times before the applications for students were accepted. The school is a "school of limited choice" which means that seats were offered to students in the surrounding schools based on the completion of an application prior to enrollment. Each parent was expected to understand the school philosophy prior to the submission of an application for their child. With these factors in mind it would be

expected that the teachers and parents would be well informed about multi-age grouping. Several findings have emerged based upon the study. First, the teachers are relatively inexperienced in working with multi-age groupings. Although the majority reported that they liked working with this type of group, many felt that the support they received was inadequate. The teachers dealt with the challenges of multi-age grouping by integrating the curriculum and teaching with thematic units. Second, many of the parents and students did not have enough information about multi-age groupings prior to the beginning of the school year. Although the majority of the parents attended the briefing sessions, it seems that the information was not disseminated in a clear enough manner for it to be understood by the parents. Third, and perhaps most important, it appears that despite the obstacles, the children are having a positive experience at the school. All of the children reported that they felt they helped each other to learn. The majority reported that they enjoyed this type of grouping. A discussion of these findings follows.

Teachers' Views on Multi-age Grouping

The teachers who participated in this study generally had good views on multi-age grouping. They felt that this type of grouping was beneficial to students at both ends of the spectrum. They felt that the younger children benefitted from having the older children to model for them and they felt that the older children benefitted from being mentors to the younger children. They also felt that it was beneficial to have some of the same children return to their class each year.

The teachers did not feel, however, that they were receiving adequate support. Many did not feel that the information was available

to them. The teachers were struggling to implement a program that they felt they did not have enough information about. The teachers' understanding of this type of grouping could be increased by offering more information in the school and by making it possible for teachers to observe this type of model. Gaustad (1992, p. 3) feels that it is more difficult to teach in a multi-age setting, it requires more teacher planning time. She also quotes the director of the Kentucky Department of Education's Division of Early Childhood Education who states that multi-age grouping also requires "more knowledge about child development, integrated curriculum, and instructional strategies" than traditional groupings. Gaustad (p. 4) feels that changing to multi-age grouping should be phased in over several years. The teachers should be made to understand that although the school opened as a multi-age classroom school, very few of the children or their parents have ever had any experience in this type of setting. It will take some time for every one to feel comfortable with this model. As time passes, everyone will begin to become more familiar with the benefits that this type of grouping offers.

Students' View's on Multi-age Grouping

It appears that the children at the school have made the adjustment to multi-age grouping. They responded that they enjoyed being able to "help each other" and "being a family". I have made several informal observations in my classroom over the last several months that have affected my views on multi-age grouping. The first occurred in late October when I observed one of my older children gathering a group of children around her during math workshop. This student was very insecure in her abilities when she first entered the class and often cried and withdrew when a challenge was presented to her. During this

particular observation, she became the teacher, instructing the children on how to divide a group of twenty-four bottle caps into four even groups. She and I had worked on the task for most of the period the day before, and I was unsure that she had understood the concept. As I watched her show the other children how to do "division", I realized that she had grasped the concept and was becoming more sure of her abilities as she "instructed" the other children. The second observation happened early in December when I paired two particularly difficult children together as reading buddies. Both of the children had been paired with other partners and were unable to work cooperatively up to that point. Out of frustration, I decided to pair them together and watch closely in case any problems developed. As they worked together to built sentences from words taken from their literature selection, I observed that they were working well together. When it was time for clean-up, I complemented the pair on how well they had worked together. The younger child immediately turned to me and said "I couldn't have done it without her". The two have been working together as reading buddies and have had no further problems. It appears that the children have benefitted greatly from the community spirit we are trying to build in the school.

Parents' Views on Multi-age Grouping

The parents who participated in the survey have not yet made a judgment about multi-age grouping. The school has made an attempt to foster parental understanding of multi-age grouping by offering the pre-enrollment briefing sessions and several "meet the teacher" nights. Many of the parents have not made use of these opportunities. Several stated that they did not know where to turn to get more information. It would

benefit the parents to be invited into the classrooms to see their children at work. Many of the parents expressed concern about the lack of textbooks and worksheets. It would be advantageous for them to see their children have the hands-on learning experiences that are a part of multi-age grouping. It would also be helpful if the school had a group of parents to serve as information sources for the rest of the community. Ideally, these parents would be "experts" on multi-age grouping. They would be invited to participate in any staff development opportunities and encouraged to bring the information out into the community. This group of parents would become a part of the school community and accepted as valuable collaborators in the education of their children. They would be involved in school planning and decision making. Gaustad (1992, p. 3) says that educating and informing parents (and teachers) is the first priority. She goes on to say that both groups are more likely to support non-grading (multi-age groups) when they are involved in planning and decision making.

Conclusion

The multi-age model of grouping children appears to have many benefits for the children. Although it often takes more work on the part of teachers, and a much patience in bringing it into practice, the theory appears to be a sound one. The survey has uncovered many questions still to be answered and it is obvious that there is still a great deal of work to be done in order to win the acceptance of the community. It is necessary to note that the study was done in the first semester of the first year of operation for this school. It will be interesting to go back in a couple of years and redo the survey to see how much has changed.

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